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## Phillips, RELIGION AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF CONTEMPLATION

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*Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, by D.Z. Phillips, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp xiv + 330 ISBN 0-52180368-3 (hardback), ISBN 0-52100846-8 (paperback). \$70.00 hardback, \$25.00 paperback.

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This book, D.Z. Phillips tells us in his preface, started as a revision of his *Religion Without Explanation* (1976), a classic Wittgensteinian critique of attempts to give reductive explanations (philosophical, sociological, psychological) of religious beliefs. But, as he says, "revision became rewriting" (xi) and this is substantially a new (and considerably longer) book, though recognisable as a descendent of the earlier one. (6 of the 11 Chapters of *Religion Without Explanation* were omitted and the remainder heavily revised, while 8 new Chapters were added.) The book, then, needs to be read as a new work, not simply a new edition of an old one.

In the first Chapter Phillips outlines his understanding of the way that philosophers should approach religion. Rejecting both the apologetically oriented "hermeneutics of recollection" and the debunking "hermeneutics of suspicion," he argues for a "hermeneutics of contemplation," which attempts to clarify and attend to the sense that is present in religious practices without either endorsing or repudiating those practices. I will return to the question of what this "contemplation" involves and whether it represents a coherent aim for the philosopher of religion.

The main body of the book is devoted to the critique of a variety of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists who have attempted to provide debunking, reductive explanations of religion. (So the attention is all given to practitioners of the hermeneutics of suspicion; there is no extended discussion of any of the hermeneutics of recollection.) After a Chapter on Bernard Williams' account of ancient Greek religion, Phillips gives us successive Chapters on Hume, Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, Tylor and Frazer, Marett, Freud, Durkheim, Levy-Bruhl and Peter Berger. There is then a Chapter discussing the development of Peter Winch's Wittgensteinian critique of reductive trends in sociology and anthropology, and a brief conclusion, also drawing heavily on Winch, and defending the idea of a "hermeneutics of contemplation." Winch (to whose memory the book is dedicated), Rush Rees and, of course, Wittgenstein, figure prominently as allies and inspirations throughout the book. The most obvious omission—in this context both glaring and baffling—is Nietzsche. A critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion that considers Feuerbach, Marx and Freud at length—and finds space for extended discussion of Marett and Levy-Bruhl—doesn't have so much as a single index entry for Nietzsche.

Phillips' detailed discussions of the particular thinkers he does deal with contain much that is interesting and insightful. But in the remainder of this review I want to concentrate on his more general ambition—to make a case for the hermeneutics of contemplation as the correct methodology for the philosophy of religion. Phillips says that the hermeneutics of contemplation "is simply an application to religion of the more general contemplative character of philosophy itself" (4). Philosophy as he conceives of it contem-

plates the various kinds of discourse, forms of life or what have you, tries to give an overview of the sense that they have, but does not try to assess whether or not they are valid. It is concerned, one might say, with meaning, not truth.<sup>1</sup> By insisting that understanding is not the same as believing Phillips tries to make room for a neutral, descriptive account of a religion. A believer and an unbeliever may be able to agree on a descriptive account of the sense a religion has, but one will accept and the other repudiate it. But the philosopher qua philosopher is concerned only to "contemplate possibilities of sense" which is "different from advocating those possibilities, or finding a faith to live by in them" (5). Phillips therefore distinguishes such philosophical contemplation from both the activity of the religious thinker who "lives in the expectancy of a new Word that has a message for him" (5) and that of the atheist who denies that religion, taken at face value, does make sense, and therefore wants to explain it reductively, as a disguised manifestation of 'natural' psychological or social forces.

So, in contrast to many contemporary thinkers, Phillips wants to retain the ancient ideal of the philosopher as able to transcend his or her particular standpoint and personal beliefs and enjoy (qua philosopher) a "view from nowhere"—even though he allows that the philosopher, qua existing human being, will want to endorse or repudiate some of the positions s/he merely contemplates in philosophical moments. But is this neutral stance really a possible one? Doesn't it, as Kierkegaard would argue, involve an ultimately untenable distinction between the philosopher and the existing individual who does philosophy? Can one separate out description from personal appropriation as neatly as Phillips supposes? Can, for instance, a Christian, a Buddhist and an atheist, qua philosophers, all come to agree on the sense of Christianity, Buddhism and atheism? How can my understanding of the possibilities of sense present in a different world-view be isolated from the world-view that I hold? Phillips, unfortunately, does not give us any clear or systematic discussion of such questions here. The problem with the neutrality that he claims is brought out strikingly by his treatment of Bernard Williams. After setting out eight "assumptions" which he takes to govern Williams' thinking about religion, he comments that his aim is not "to show that the secular, humanistic perspective Williams advocates is wrong...Rather, the aim is to question the *generality* of Williams' assumptions." (39) But it is crucial to Williams' secular humanism that his anti-religious assumptions *do* hold universally. To question their generality *is* to question his perspective as a whole.

Phillips says he opposes "that theoretical atheism which claims that all religious beliefs are meaningless" (5). But, in line with his neutrality, he does not want to claim (qua philosopher) that atheism is mistaken. One might therefore think he would understand (non-confused) atheism as the claim that religious beliefs, while meaningful, are in fact false. But this view seems dubious in itself. Whatever may be wrong with the ontological argument, it is surely correct to point out that the existence (or non-existence) of God cannot be a contingent matter of fact—it can't just happen to be the case that God either exists or doesn't. And Phillips recognises this, quoting approvingly from Rees (who is discussing the ontological argument): "'God exists' is not a statement of fact....It is an expression—or con-

fession—of faith” (96). Moreover, Phillips repudiates Proudfoot’s suggestion that one should start by trying to understand the sense that religion makes for a believer, but can then legitimately go on to develop reductive explanations for why the believers hold those (false) beliefs. (10–17) So if Phillips doesn’t think an atheist can say either that religious beliefs are meaningful but false, or that they are meaningless, how can he be saying that atheism is none the less a coherent position?

I think this difficulty takes us to the heart of what is troubling about Phillips’ approach to the philosophy of religion. Throughout his career, he has seemed torn between two very different but easily confused positions. One is what I would take to be Wittgenstein’s own view; that ontological claims, such as ‘God exists,’ can only be understood in the context of the practices in which they are made—but that they are none the less genuinely ontological for that. The other is (a highly sophisticated version of) the positivistic view that religious claims can only be construed as non-cognitive, as the expression or adoption of an attitude. As in most of Phillips’ works, there is a good deal of ambiguity in this book; Phillips says things which are compatible with both positions without ever clearly distinguishing between them. But the positivism does seem to be in the ascendant. On that view, religion is an attitude to the world which one may or may not adopt; but no question of its truth or falsity arises. If this is what Phillips assumes, then it would explain why he treats (unconfused) atheism purely as an existential choice not to get involved in certain practices, not as a judgement that religion is either false or meaningless.

Phillips is understandably annoyed at the way in which his position has been crudely caricatured as “Wittgensteinian Fideism,” and devotes a few pages to distinguishing his hermeneutics of contemplation from this straw man (25–30). His central claim that understanding the sense in a set of beliefs is different from personally appropriating those beliefs is plainly the antithesis of the idea, widely ascribed to him, that only believers can understand what religious beliefs are. However, Phillips does nothing here to allay the deeper worries about his approach—that it preserves religion from (at least a certain kind of) philosophical criticism by evacuating it of its substance. He states that “Just as there is a difference between saying ‘I do not appreciate chamber music’ and ‘there is nothing in chamber music to appreciate,’ so there would be a difference between someone’s saying that they cannot see any sense in either religion or atheism and the claim that there is no sense in either to be appreciated” (6). But this analogy raises precisely those worries. For it simply ignores the fact that a religion, unlike a kind of music, makes truth-claims.<sup>2</sup> A philosophical critic of a religion is not just someone who doesn’t find a certain way of life attractive, but someone who rejects the claims about the nature of reality that it makes.

That Phillips is committed to a reductive, “attitudinal” account—which certainly fails in its stated aim of simply contemplating the sense that is present in religious discourse—is made especially clear in Chapter 4, where he considers Feuerbach’s claim that the belief in immortality is an instance of wishful thinking, an attempt to evade facing up to the inevitability of death (112–15). Phillips responds by considering various ways in which religious beliefs could be understood as ways of facing up

to, accepting that inevitability (116–29). What is notable is that he simply takes for granted the truth of Feuerbach's assumption that death is the end, that there is no conscious survival beyond death. Having a religious belief is in this case, reduced to having a certain attitude to the agreed-on facts as they are stated in a naturalistic metaphysics such as Feuerbach's. I suspect that Phillips' ideal of neutrality is not really a coherent one; and this suspicion is somewhat encouraged by the fact that Phillips himself, rather than simply contemplating the differences between religious and naturalistic perspectives, ends up reducing the former so that they offer no challenge to the truth of the latter.

### NOTES

1. For a detailed argument in favour of this view of philosophy, see Phillips' *Philosophy's Cool Place* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1999).

2. There are actually circumstances in which I would be willing to say that music *does* make truth-claims. But I don't think Phillips is intending the analogy to be taken in this sense.

*On Augustine*, by Sharon M. Kaye and Paul Thomson. Wadsworth, 2001. Pp 83. Paper \$15.95; *On Ockham*, by Sharon M. Kaye and Robert M. Martin. Wadsworth, 2001. Pp. 97. Paper \$15.95.

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These two very short books offer basic introductions to the thought of Augustine and William of Ockham. They are part of the Wadsworth Philosophers Series under the general editorship of Daniel Kolak, a collection now comprising some forty volumes aimed at providing "a brief and accessible insight into the ideas of major philosophers throughout history ... empowering the reader to better understand the original works of these influential figures" (from the back cover). Although these books are intended as stand-alone texts, the publisher suggests that they would also be "excellent companions to, and may be bundled with, Daniel Kolak's *The Philosophy Source*, a CD-ROM that provides ready access to over 100 classic, primary readings." I have not examined the latter text for this review.

I mention this because the most important thing to know about these books is that they are written for students as opposed to specialist scholars or professional philosophers or even academics in other fields, a fact not immediately clear from the books themselves. The prose is spartan and reads like a revised set of lecture notes, complete with the sort of hip, off-the-wall allusions undergraduate students find appealing: "the [Pyrrhonian] skeptic would ask what color the book would appear to a Venusian equipped with infra-red vision, or to Superman with x-ray eyes, or when viewed under ultra-violet light" (*On Augustine*: 28); "Ockham's view [on freedom] resonates well with that of the twentieth-century libertarian, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). We are what we make ourselves to be" (*On Ockham*: 70). At a certain level, it is hard to know what to make of such remarks. But anyone